



Johannes Vermeer
Dutch, 1632 - 1675

A Lady Writing

c. 1665

oil on canvas

overall: 45 x 39.9 cm (17 11/16 x 15 11/16 in.)

framed: 68.3 x 62.2 x 7 cm (26 7/8 x 24 1/2 x 2 3/4 in.)

Inscription: center left on frame of picture on back wall: IVMEER (IVM in ligature)

Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer 1962.10.1

ENTRY

Vermeer, to a greater extent than any other Dutch artist, was able to capture the delicate equilibrium between the physical stillness of a setting and a transient moment of an individual arrested within it. As in *Woman Holding a Balance*, he has focused here on a psychological moment by subordinating all physical action. A woman, dressed elegantly in a lemon-yellow morning jacket bordered with ermine trim, sits before a table. She holds a quill pen firmly in her right hand, while her left hand secures the paper. She looks up from her writing and regards the viewer with a slightly quizzical expression. As in so many of his masterpieces, Vermeer gives no explanation for the significance of her gaze. This characteristic has led to criticism that his paintings lack psychological penetration, but it is also an essential ingredient in the poetic suggestiveness of his images.

A Lady Writing is signed with a monogram on the lower frame of the picture on the back wall, but like most Vermeer paintings, it is not dated. The painting style and technique, as well as the woman's costume and hairdo, however, relate to other works that appear to belong to the artist's mature phase, in the mid-to-late 1660s. The woman's elegant yellow jacket is almost certainly the one mentioned in the inventory of household effects made after Vermeer's death.[1] It is found in three other of his paintings from this period: *Young Lady Adorning Herself with a Pearl Necklace* in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin; *Lady with a Lute* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and *Mistress and Maid* in the Frick Collection, New York [fig. 1]. [2] The inkwells and the decorated casket on the table are similar to those in the Frick painting. The hairstyle, with the braided chignon on the back of the head

and the ribbons tied in bows formed like stars, was popular in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, particularly after the early 1660s.[3]

Conceptually, this painting relates to *Woman Holding a Balance*, for in both works Vermeer has explored a moment in which the central figure has paused in the course of her activity. The woman's image in *A Lady Writing*, however, is weightier. The delicate equilibrium between stillness and implied movement found in *Woman Holding a Balance* has shifted toward stillness. Likewise, Vermeer's concern for the woman's physical appearance—for her costume, hairstyle, and expression—has taken on greater importance. Such differences may be relevant chronologically, for they are characteristics found in a number of Vermeer's later works. Seen in conjunction with the refined elegance of the woman's appearance, they suggest that *A Lady Writing* dates slightly after the *Woman Holding a Balance*.

Vermeer has here significantly reduced the number of compositional elements and focused intently on the woman's figure and a few objects in her environment. Not only is she proportionally larger and fuller than the woman holding the balance, she and the table on which she writes are quite close to the picture plane, a proximity emphasized by the directness of her gaze. Although in both paintings light enters from the left, no light source is shown in *A Lady Writing*. The light is illuminating the tabletop, the woman's face, and her rich lemon-yellow morning jacket, is softer and more diffused than that of *Woman Holding a Balance*.

Vermeer limited his composition here to a few select elements that reinforce the central motif of a woman writing. He has clustered all the small objects in the painting on the table. This concentration of small shapes contrasts with the broad forms of the rest of the composition, which create a geometric framework for the figure. The picture on the back wall, for example, covers two-thirds of the width of the composition. The width of the wall to the right of the picture is equal to the height of the table, or one-half the distance from the bottom of the picture to the bottom edge of the painting itself. The width of the table, moreover, is approximately one-half the width of the painting. Such proportional relationships help balance and harmonize the essentially asymmetrical composition.

In much the same manner that Vermeer has refined his composition by eliminating extraneous elements, so has he eliminated anecdotal elements that give clues to the meaning of the painting. While he has depicted a woman, pen in hand, looking directly at the viewer, he has not indicated whether she is contemplating her

message or directing her attention outward. Unlike other of Vermeer's depictions of letter writers such as the *Mistress and Maid* (Frick Collection, New York), no maid delivers a letter or awaits a reply. One possible indication of the general theme of the painting may be given by the picture hanging on the back wall. This dark and barely distinguishable image appears to be a still life with musical instruments.[4] The only recognizable instrument is a bass viol. Musical instruments often carry implications of love, and thus it may be understood that the letter is directed to an absent lover.[5]

Such an interpretation is supported by relating *A Lady Writing* to the iconographic tradition found in the works of many of Vermeer's contemporaries, particularly Gerard ter Borch the Younger (Dutch, 1617 - 1681), Gabriel Metsu (Dutch, 1629 - 1667), and Frans van Mieris (Dutch, 1635 - 1681). Many of these paintings of letter writers have explicit love connotations and can be related to emblematic literature. Metsu, for example, in his painting *A Young Woman Composing Music* in the Mauritshuis [fig. 2], has depicted a woman sitting at a table contemplating the music she is writing.[6] Behind her stands an attentive man, before her another woman playing a lute. Above the fireplace hangs a painting of a ship in a stormy sea. Aside from the sensuous connotations of the man and the music of the lute, the painting above the fireplace relates to emblems commenting upon the perils of love.[7] The difference between *A Lady Writing* and the iconographic traditions of genre paintings of women writing or receiving love letters is in large part a result of Vermeer's focus on the individuality of the woman. Because of her distinctive features, direct gaze, and closeness to the picture plane, the painting reads as much as a portrait as it does a genre scene.

One possible explanation for the woman's striking pose is that *A Lady Writing* is, indeed, a portrait. The letter-writing theme would have allowed Vermeer to achieve a convincing sense of naturalism that formal portraits often lack. Although no documentary evidence confirms that Vermeer painted portraits, certain compositional characteristics in this work seem to reinforce this hypothesis. He has posed the woman in the foreground of the painting, thereby enhancing her physical and psychological presence. Her distinctive features—a large forehead and a long, narrow nose—are portraiture characteristics that resemble those of *Study of a Young Woman*, c. 1666–1667 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and are not as idealized as those of women in his other genre scenes of the same period. Finally, her form is modeled with delicate brushstrokes and subtle nuances of color that articulate her features with unusual clarity.

The identity of the sitter has not been established. One possibility is that she is Vermeer's wife, Catharina Bolnes. Born in 1631, she would have been in her early-to-mid thirties when Vermeer painted this work. Although it is difficult to judge the age of models in paintings, such an age does seem appropriate for this figure, and she does wear Catharina's yellow jacket.[8] Her physical features, however, differ from those of the model for *Woman Holding a Balance*, who is likely Catharina Bolnes.[9]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Johannes Vermeer, *Mistress and Maid*, c. 1667–1668, oil on canvas, Frick Collection, New York. Photo © The Frick Collection, New York



fig. 2 Gabriel Metsu, *A Young Woman Composing Music*, c. 1662–1663, oil on panel, Mauritshuis, The Hague

NOTES

- [1] John Michael Montias, *Recent Archival Research on Vermeer*, *Studies in the History of Art* (Washington, D.C., 1998), 339, doc. 364: “a yellow satin mantle with white fur trimming.”
- [2] See inventory no. 912B from the Staatliche Museen, Berlin; inventory no. 25.110.24 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and inventory no. 19.1.126 from the Frick Collection, New York. For the dating of the Frick painting, see *The Frick Collection: An Illustrated Catalogue: Paintings, American, British, Dutch, Flemish and German* (New York, 1968), 296–297.
- [3] This information was kindly supplied by A. M. Louise E. Mulder-Erkelen, keeper of textiles, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (see her letter of May 7, 1974, to A. B. de Vries, copy in NGA curatorial files).
- [4] Keil Boström, “Jan Vermeer van Delft en Cornelis van der Meulen,” *Oud-Holland* 66 (1951): 117–122, suggests that the painting depicted may be one by Adam Frans van der Meulen (French, born Flanders, 1632 - 1690). The evidence, however, is not sufficient to sustain an attribution. A painting depicting “a bass viol with a skull” is listed in the inventory of Vermeer’s possessions after his death in 1676. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 340, doc. 364.
- [5] This thematic association was first suggested by Albert P. de Mirimonde, “Les Sujets musicaux chez Vermeer de Delft,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 57 (January 1961): 40. For emblematic literature relating musical instruments to love see Eddy de Jongh, *Zinne- en Minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1967), 50–51.
- [6] See Gabriel Metsu, *A Young Woman Composing Music*, c. 1662–1663 (Mauritshuis, inventory no. 94). Franklin W. Robinson, *Gabriel Metsu*

(1629–1667): *A Study of His Place in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (New York, 1974), 64–65, dates this painting to around 1667.

- [7] Eddy de Jongh, *Zinne- en Minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1967), 50–51.
 - [8] John Michael Montias, *Recent Archival Research on Vermeer*, *Studies in the History of Art* (Washington, D.C., 1998), 339, doc. 364: “a yellow satin mantle with white fur trimming.”
 - [9] See Ernst Gunther Grimme, *Jan Vermeer van Delft* (Cologne, 1974), 54. For my identification of the model in *Woman Holding a Balance* as Catharina Bolnes, Vermeer’s wife and the mother of his fifteen children, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675): Sainte Praxède–Saint Praxedis* (Monaco, 1998), 28.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The fabric support has a moderately fine weave.[1] It has been lined, and fragments remain of the original tacking margins. The support was prepared with a warm gray ground, which extends onto the tacking margin on the right and lower edges.[2] Examination has revealed evidence of an underdrawing or painted sketch.

Vermeer worked with a colored underpaint characterized by stronger contrasts of light and dark than the final paint and a rougher texture. The contrast of smoothly blended final paint over the vigorous underpaint creates a variety of effects. In the yellow jacket, for example, vigorous folds described in the underpaint were smoothed by fluid strokes, followed by rounded highlights touched into wet paint to form specular reflections on the fabric. Contours are softened by blending adjacent paint areas wet-into-wet, or by leaving a small area of ground or underpaint exposed along the edges.[3] X-radiography and infrared reflectography at 1.2 to 5 microns[4] show the pen inclined more to the right, with the proper right index finger adjusted accordingly.

A few flake losses exist, mostly on the edges. Small, regularly spaced holes along the left and right edges penetrate the paint and ground layer but do not align with the cusping pattern or appear to be tack holes from a dimensional change. There is some abrasion in the still life hanging on the wall, but overall the painting is in excellent condition. It was treated in 1935 by Louis de Wild.[5] In 1994 and 1995 the painting was treated again to remove De Wild’s varnish and inpainting, both of which had discolored considerably.

[1] Average densities of 14.5 threads/cm horizontally and 12.1 threads/cm vertically were measured by the Thread Count Automation Project of Cornell University and Rice University (see report dated May 2010 in NGA Conservation department files).

[2] Robert L. Feller, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, has identified chalk, lead white, black, and red and yellow iron oxide pigments in the gray ground (see report dated June 26, 1974, in NGA Conservation department files).

[3] Melanie Gifford, "Painting Light: Recent Observations on Vermeer's Technique," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (Washington, D.C., 1998), 185–199.

[4] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Kodak 310-21X PtSi focal plane array camera.

[5] See memo dated February 2, 1968, in NGA Conservation department files.

PROVENANCE

Possibly Pieter Claesz van Ruijven [1624-1674], Delft; possibly by inheritance to his wife, Maria de Knuijt [d. 1681]; possibly by inheritance to her daughter, Magdalena van Ruijven [1655-1682], Delft; possibly by inheritance to her husband, Jacobus Abrahamsz. Dissius [1653-1695], Delft; [1] (his sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 35); [2] J. van Buren, The Hague; (his sale, Bernardus Scheurleer, The Hague, 7-12 November 1808, 6th day [12 Nov.], no. 22 of the paintings). Dr. Cornelis Jan Luchtmans [1777-1860], Rotterdam; (his sale, by Mierop, Muys van Leen, and Lamme, Rotterdam, 20 and 22 April 1816, 1st day, no. 90); J. Kamermans, Rotterdam; (his sale, by A. Lamme, Rotterdam, 3 October 1825, no. 70); Lelie; [3] Hendrik Reydon; (his sale, by J. de Vries, A. Brondgeest, E.M. Engelberts, and C.F. Roos, Amsterdam, 5-6 April 1827, no. 26). François-Xavier, comte de Robiano [1778-1836], Brussels; (his estate sale, Hotel du Défunt, Brussels, 1 May 1837 and days following, no. 436); purchased by Hérís for François-Xavier's son. Ludovic, comte de Robiano [1807-1887], Brussels; by inheritance to Ludovic's heirs, possibly his daughter and only child, Jeanne [1835-1900] and her husband, Gustave, baron de Senzeilles de Soumagne [1824-1906], until 1906; [4] (J. & A. LeRoy, Brussels); purchased 1907 by J. Pierpont Morgan [1837-1913], New York; by inheritance to his

son, J. P. Morgan, Jr. [1867-1943], New York; consigned 1935-1939 to, and purchased 1940 by (M. Knoedler & Co., New York); sold 1940 to Sir Harry Oakes [1874-1943], Nassau, Bahamas; by gift or inheritance to his wife, Lady Eunice Myrtle McIntyre Oakes [c. 1894-1981], Nassau, Bahamas; consigned 1946 to (M. Knoedler & Co., New York);[5] sold 1946 to Horace Havemeyer [1886-1956], New York; by inheritance to his sons, Harry Waldron Havemeyer [b. 1929], New York, and Horace Havemeyer, Jr. [1914-1990], New York;[6] gift 1962 to NGA.

[1] The 1683 inventory of goods accruing to Jacob Dissius after the death of his wife Magdalena van Ruyven lists twenty paintings by Vermeer. For the complete transactions between her husband Jacob Dissius and his father Abraham Dissius following her death, see John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989: 246-257, 359-361, docs. 417, 420.

[2] For this sale see Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989: 363-364, doc. 439.

[3] This name is recorded in an annotated copy of the sale catalogue in the NGA Library.

[4] This is suggested by the Getty Provenance Index© Databases, Public Collections, record 17464.

[5] The Knoedler's consignment numbers were CA 1503 (from Morgan) and CA 2758 (from Lady Oakes), per the Getty Provenance Index© Databases, Public Collections, record 17464.

[6] Harry W. Havemeyer (correspondence 12 August 2010) indicated that Vermeer's painting hung over the fireplace in the library of their residence at 720 Park Avenue, but emphasized that the fireplace, therefore, was never used. He wrote that his father probably had first admired the painting at the Hudson-Fulton exhibition in 1909, and was pleased to be able to acquire it from Knoedler's when it was offered to him in 1946. Harry and Horace Havemeyer decided to donate the painting to the National Gallery of Art because of their father's admiration for the

Gallery and its director John Walker.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1873 Exposition de tableaux et dessins d'anciens maîtres, La société néerlandaise de bienfaisance à Bruxelles, Brussels, 1873, no. 264.

1908 Loan to display with the permanent collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1908 and 1909-1913.

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 136.

1935 Vermeer, Oorsprong en Invloed, Fabritius, de Hooch, de Witte, Museum Boymans-van-Bauningen, Rotterdam, 1935, no. 86a.

1939 Masterpieces of Art. European Paintings and Sculpture from 1300-1800, New York World's Fair, 1939, no. 399. repro.

1940 Loan Exhibition of Allied Art for Allied Aid for the Benefit of the Red Cross War Relief Fund, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1940, no. 6.

1941 Loan Exhibition in Honor of Royal Cortissoz and His 50 Years of Criticism in the New York Herald Tribune, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1941, no. 71.

1942 Paintings by the Great Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century, Duveen Galleries, New York, 1942, no. 68, repro.; Art Institute of Chicago, no. 42, repro.

1943 An Exhibition of Paintings by Living Masters of the Past, Baltimore Museum of Art, 1943, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1976 Chefs-d'oeuvre de Musées des États-Unis de Giorgione à Picasso, Musée Marmottan, Paris, 1976, no. 18, repro.

1976 Zapadnoevropeiskaia i Amerikanskaia zhivopis is muzeev ssha [West European and American Painting from the Museums of USA], State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad; State Pushkin Museum, Moscow; State Museums, Kiev and Minsk, 1976, unnumbered catalogue.

1987 Space in European Art: Council of Europe Exhibition in Japan, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, 1987, no. 86.

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

1989 Masterpieces of Western European Painting of the XVIth-XXth Centuries
from the Museums of the European Countries and USA, State Hermitage
Museum, Leningrad, 1989, no. 14, repro.

1990 Great Dutch Paintings from America, Mauritshuis, The Hague; The Fine Arts
Museums of San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, 1990-1991, no. 67,
color repro., as A Girl Writing a Letter.

1993 Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer, Schirn
Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany, 1993-1994, no. 85, repro.

1995 Johannes Vermeer, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Royal Cabinet
of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1995-1996, no. 13, repro.

1999 Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting, National Gallery of Art, Washington,
D.C., 1999-2000, not in brochure.

1999 Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Kyoto Municipal
Museum of Art; Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 1999, no. 83, repro.

2001 Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt, The Newark
Museum; Denver Art Museum, 2001-2002, no. 108, fig. 108 (shown only in
Denver).

2003 Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer, National
Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, Greenwich,
Connecticut, 2003-2004, no. 38, fig. 55, repro. 181 (shown only in Dublin).

2004 Senses and Sins: Dutch Painters of Daily Life in the Seventeenth Century,
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Städtisches Kunstinstitut und
Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt, 2004-2005, no. 69, repro.

2011 Human Connections in the Age of Vermeer, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art;
The Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai; The Bunkamura Museum of Art, Tokyo, 2011-
2012, no. 42, repro.

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- 1952 Gowing, Lawrence. *Vermeer*. London, 1952: 134, no. xviii, fig. 42.
- 1952 Malraux, André, ed. *Vermeer de Delft*. Paris, 1952: 65, no. xiii, repro.
- 1954 Bloch, Vitale. *Tutta la Pittura di Vermeer di Delft*. Milan, 1954: 35, pl. 53.
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